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## Latinos Under the (Black) Pen: Reflections from the Local Black Press on Impending Changing Demographics

### Cover Page Footnote

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# LATINOS UNDER THE (BLACK) PEN:

Reflections from  
the Local Black Press on Impending  
Changing Demographics

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Saint Louis, Missouri, is a very Black city. At the statistics level, Blacks and Whites are evenly distributed among the 350,000 inhabitants—with Hispanics/Latinos and Asians accounting for 5%, more or less. Yet, one only has to travel to the different destinations within Saint Louis to realize that imagery overtakes numerical realities. It is the movement of the Black or African American population that allows for this perception.

To simplify, the city's north is heavily Black while the south/southwest is mostly White. However, the lack of shopping and entertainment venues on the north pushes the people there to seek them out in the south while the non-Black population rarely ventures into this other territory. This form of movement is stark when one observes the vehicular traffic on important arteries linking north and south (east-west transit is much more varied). And, if one needs a final reminder the use of public transportation will provide it. Fully 90% of all bus users are African Americans, regardless of where one is traveling to.

The preceding is a brief glimpse into the context of this paper since if I had not been in such a setting, I would not have thought of this theme: how do Black presses in the U.S. cover and represent the increasing demographic presence of Latinos. In focus, what the reaction and coverage was to the census and news reports in 2003 establishing Latinos as the largest minority, overtaking the Black population for this 'honor'. To do this, I began to read and collect the weekly St. Louis American, a Black newspaper which positions itself as the "largest, most widely-read weekly newspaper targeted to African Americans," and reaching an estimated 40-45% of Black households in the metropolitan area.

In essence, it was this free weekly which stirred my interest in how the Black press may cover issues with a Latino tint, particularly its new status. It began with the St. Louis American

edition of January 30, 2003, with the somewhat tantalizing report title of "Black not largest minority—maybe" and a very unusual critical assessment of the situation by a reporter who usually covered dance, music, and entertainment related notes. Delores Shante in her section PARTYLINE stated, "A demographer said Latinos are becoming the largest minority group because their birth and immigration rate is higher. *I wonder if our high rates of incarceration and early death contribute as well* (my emphasis)."

Indirectly, this essay also addresses how the Black press covers and reacts to stories covered by the mainstream media—in this case, the reporting of the 2000-2002 census figures placing Latinos ahead of Blacks, 38.8% to 38.3% (LA Times, June 19, 2003, p. A-1). For example, CNN.com in its January 23, 2003, included the statement that Hispanics indeed had surpassed Blacks due to their higher birth rates and immigration flows. This 'changing of the minority guard', so to speak, "carries significant political and cultural stakes" (St. Louis American, January 30, 2003, p. B-2), and how this threshold is covered by the larger media is of concern to the African American population and news media. In some Black circles, there is a sense that the 'white' media may in fact be celebrating—disguised as reporting—such demographic change.

Before returning to the theme at hand, I will first present two topics that will help in placing this essay in larger contexts. Section II will give a brief history, development, and role of the Black press, while Section III will briefly address what others have called Brown – Black relations. Section IV will retake the case study of the St. Louis American and its reaction/coverage to the impending fact that "Hispanics had edged past Blacks" (NY Times, June 19, 2003). I will then end with the concluding part where the this work will be briefly summarized and new avenues of research expanded upon.



## II. THE BLACK PRESS: A BRIEF STATEMENT

The U.S. Black press started in 1827 with the first issue of the *Freedom's Journal* of New York (Tripp 1992:9; Vogel 2001:1). From the beginning it sought to present issues affecting the African American population, provide an alternate interpretation, and advocate for Blacks' civil rights. As Barber & Tait point out, "The Black press, since its beginning in 1827, has attempted to serve, speak for, and fight for the Black minority population of the United States, and it has a long history of service and advocacy" (2001:77). Additionally, then, the Black press not only informs...but has served as a voice for the Black community as well (Silvie 2001:80).

The points included above are key in understanding how the Black press may cover a story, in this case Latino demographic growth. In brief, it has to juggle at least two obligations: report the news to its reading base, while attempting to provide an alternate—and African American view—to balance in their opinion what and how the mainstream (White) press is reporting. Reporters and editors, then, "must find fresh ways to address...big questions that receive gallons of ink elsewhere" (Vogel 2001:3), while disseminating an African American point of view (Fultz 1998:130).

The Black press also has elements that relate it to community reporting, or the community press. As early as 1952, Morris Janowitz posited that the "urban community newspaper is defined as a weekly...publication addressed to the residents of a specific area of the urban metropolis" (p.19) and that it is the local community readership that "conditions its content, determines its appeal, and facilitates its impact" (p.7). Often the concept of community newspaper is linked to rural or small towns. However, the characteristics and role of the Black and community press include many of the same issues and concerns—selected population, alternate views, venue to channel muted voices.

From the abbreviated information above, we can begin to make some assessment of the Black and urban community press. Particularly, when and if 'fair reporting' may not be enough as a stand-alone story. Editors, reporters, and staff may have a larger whole to address. The paper also needs to present another voice, or at the very least communicate to its base in a format that doesn't just mimic the larger dailies. Further, the Black press has the tradition of advocacy to respond to. It cannot, should not, shy away from this historical role. In a way, Black papers are forced to take a stand, to make an opinion, to offer an alternate interpretation. The concept of 'fair reporting', though often not respected as we all know, can be a luxury to the larger media, and thus be weighed differently in community reporting.



Accountability, from the perspective of others, can be the weakest part of community reporting, in this case the Black press. Accountability is "perhaps the heaviest burden" to carry (Lauterer 1995:185). I have often come across this same issue reading the Spanish language monthly (*¿Que Pasa? ... St. Louis*) and bi-weekly (*Red Latina*) newspapers serving the Spanish speaking populations of the St. Louis metropolitan areas. However, simply reporting is not the only goal of what can also be referred to as the ethnic press. Factors such as the development of consciousness (Miller 1987:xix), creating cohesiveness (Karolevitz 1985:4), and giving voice to the often voiceless are carefully woven in community

reporting. I doubt that community reporters consistently bend their data to get their point across, but we must also take into account the fact that most community newspapers "orient themselves ethically toward their communities in a fundamental different way" (Lauterer 1995:183) and may need to be understood in these terms.

The preceding treatment of the Black-community press is far from exhaustive, and may leave the reader wanting for more. (This is the effect that it had on me!!). My objective, though, was twofold: to place the St. Louis American in the greater context of Black and community reporting; and, to provide some analytical tools to my attempt to understand how and why this same Black weekly has taken a different path in its coverage of the presumed 'changing of the minority guard'. Before getting there, however, I must digress somewhat and give the reader one more bit of information: a brief treatment on some pertinent aspects of Black-Latino relations.

## III. BLACKS AND BROWNS: TIES THAT BIND

We cannot wholly study the reaction of the Black press to demographic changes without taking a look at African American-Latino relations. As is customary in situations where ethnicities interact, coalesce, and may compete with each other, where scholarship ends and opinions begin is hard to pin down. Writers such as Nicolas Vaca (2004) presents a scenario where Black-Brown relations are bound to be conflictive. To quote, "...in pursuing their own goals [they] are more likely to form coalitions, alliances, and support groups with whites than...with Latinos" (p.188). To Vaca, it will be when Blacks acknowledge that their relations with Latinos are of equal importance as with Whites that some sort of Latino-Black rapprochement will occur. "African Americans cannot expect Latinos will respond to their condition in the same way as whites, and because of this [they] must adjust their agenda accordingly" (p.191).

To Vaca and others, it is the 2000 Census that has set the new standards of Brown-Black relations. Bill Piat, wiring in 1997 when demographic changes seemed already inevitable, stated that he shuddered when hearing or reading in the media that Hispanics would soon become the largest minority group in the country (p.1). In his assessment Blacks and Latinos had not been able to form and maintain effective voting coalitions due to historical animosities (p.124). Indirectly, he was making the point that Latinos surpassing Blacks as the largest minority would only add to that animosity. "What will be the reaction of African Americans...to these demographic realities?" he asked (p.1).

John Garcia (2000) doesn't view conflict as inevitable. To him, both groups should seek each other and find common grounds for mutual benefit. First he acknowledges that African Americans "have developed into an important force in American politics...evident in U.S. urban areas, particularly the largest central cities" (p.255). A fact that Latinos active in political efforts may need to be reminded of. However, and equally important, for the African American community to forge stronger bonds between both groups, a "better understanding of what minority status has meant for Latino communities" (p.275) is also needed. Garcia's essay on Black-Brown relations is more focused on coalition efforts, or those "ventures among similarly situated groups" (p.265).

One element key in any discussion of relations between the Black and Latino community is immigration. The arrival of large numbers of peoples often disturbs established patterns, relations, and perspectives. There is no doubt that significant Latino



migration to cities, areas, or states not long ago largely unaffected by it is altering historically understood interactions and bringing in new realities. Media coverage, and to some extent studies of migration, tend to position Latin American international migration to the United States—particularly from Mexico—as something that the U.S. larger society must adapt or respond to. However, this approach may also obscure the reactions of particular ethnic or racial groups such as Asian Americans, Native Americans, and in our case, Black Americans.

Gerald Jaynes, and African American scholar whose interests include immigration points out:

*My own ambivalence toward immigration reflects my cultural position as an African American. On the subject of immigration, African Americans may be the most ambivalent group in America, reflecting a powerful tension between a widespread belief that increased immigration is detrimental to blacks' economic well-being and a moral commitment to equality and the rights of disposed peoples (2000:3).*

However, Jaynes also points out that when the negative reactions to immigrants are tallied, “blacks were more supportive of immigration and immigrants than were nonblacks” (p.40).

In a sense Blacks, as it applies to their demographic condition, are fighting a losing battle. The higher Latino birthrates, coupled with continuous migration, mean that “the phenomenal growth of the Latino population shows no sign of relenting” (Vaca 2004:19). A point driven home by the U.S. Census own numbers and projections. Thus, African Americans and Latinos must both be sensitive to what this all means in ethnic and common terms. Mulana Karenga realizes the new realities and new challenges of this repositioning of ethnic America: “...although much has been written about the importance of Black-Jewish relations, it is clear that Black-Brown relations have become and will continue to be most determinative of ethnic relations in the country (1997:190). Immigration and the changes it brings, however, must also be acknowledged by the Latino community: “Latino leaders must be sensitive to the concerns of Blacks about the coming of large numbers of immigrants and the resultant transformations of neighborhoods” (1997:198).

A larger question, then, may be the one posed by Goode and Schneider in their study of racial and ethnic relations in Philadelphia, “How do racial and ethnic dynamics change once the country is no longer Black and white?” (1994:2). I will partly address this question in the following section of one Black newspaper's coverage, and reaction, to the demographic changes of the new century which put to the test the older assumption of a White and Black America.

#### **IV. THE ST. LOUIS AMERICAN: DEMOGRAPHICS AND CHANGE**

In the January 30, 2003, edition the St. Louis American, a Black weekly, had the following brief but telling side note:

*The minority minority. Have you heard the latest minority report? According to the Census Bureau,*

*Hispanics now outnumber African-Americans. A demographer said Latinos are becoming the largest minority group because their birth and immigration rate is higher. I wonder if our high rates of incarceration and early death contribute as well. And I guess an even better question is: How do you all feel about it? And how do you think it will impact politics and the economy (p. C-10)?*

The note did not garner any responses, or to my knowledge the note writer, Ms. Delores Shante, did not post any information related to it in her next contributions. However, such revelations from the formerly apolitical PARTYLINE section did spark my intellectual curiosity that originated this essay.

The same issue also included a brief news article with a very subtle yet questioning title of ‘Blacks not largest minority – maybe’. In it, the writer questions directly or indirectly the new status of Latinos. “U.S. Hispanics have overtaken blacks as the nation's largest minority group, new census estimates showed on Tuesday—but it may all depend on how you count” (St. Louis American, Jan. 30'04, p. B-2). His point, well taken, is that Hispanics are an ethnic group and thus can belong to any race, including Black. Since in the U.S. color—particularly black—more than anything else marks and individual's life trajectories and opportunities, the subtext of his comments would be: why shouldn't black Latinos be classified as Black and thus give African Americans the edge?

### **THE ST. LOUIS AMERICAN**

[www.stlamerican.com](http://www.stlamerican.com)

The St. Louis American is a member of the National Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA), also known as the Black Press of America, and carries stories provided by the NNPA News Service. In a ‘Top Story’ entitled “Immigration issue could unite or divide Blacks and Hispanics,” NNPA Washington Correspondent Hazel Trice Edney writes about the effects of President Bush's then proposal to give undocumented workers job permits. He cites Claud Anderson, President of the Harvest Institute, a Black research and education organization in D.C. And, although not addressing the issue of Latino growth, he still recognizes the potential damage that further ‘legal’ migration can cause to African Americans:

*This country continues in its immigration policy to bring in an unending influx of immigrants into this country over Black folk. They're pushing blacks further and further down making them an underclass. They're coming here for low-income jobs, but once they leave this country they're rich in their own country because they're sending that money back home and it multiplies 10 times. Meanwhile, Black people, they're being displaced (St. Louis American, March 4'04).*

The reporter, however, while providing an African American voice to the guest worker program debate, also has a counterargument to the above through William Lucy, the African American secretary-treasurer of the American Federation of State, Country and Municipal Employees. His own assessment that Blacks and Hispanics would not be competing against one another for the same jobs is expanded when he says that,



*The nature of the work (the immigrants) will be doing by in large is agricultural work, some low-level service work. It's not that African-Americans don't want the jobs. It's just that those jobs have never been in the concentrated areas where high unemployment exists for African-American workers. What African-Americans want are jobs with living wages. We've lost more people out of the manufacturing sector over the last three years than any other place. And these were good paying middle-income class jobs. And certainly the immigrant is not going to take those kinds of jobs (St. Louis American, March 4'04).*

The point is driven home by Melvin P. Foote, president of Constituency for Africa: trying "to hang onto the fact that somehow these Hispanics who are cleaning the toilets and doing some of this janitorial work and picking tomatoes, they're going to take our jobs, is ludicrous (St. Louis American, March 4'04).

In the news report just highlighted, we see elements of mainstream media reporting—giving at least to views on the same issue—and at the same time fulfilling its obligation as a Black newspaper committed to providing channels for Black voices. In a way, it is still faithful to its readership by not shying away from controversial issues (even providing a perspective which may not agree with a majority of its readers) that will affect African Americans regardless—more migration. Almost by default, Mexican migration, regulated or not, can result in a population explosion. Slowly but surely, Latinos are extending their presence beyond their historical new homes. The L.A. times reported in its June 19, 2003 edition that Latinos outnumber Blacks already in 23 states (p. A-1). It is the Black press duty, then, to inform its own community so that such information doesn't arrive only through the larger, White-owned media.

Latinos are also using the Black press to reach out to them. Elizabeth Martinez, director of the Institute for MultiRacial Justice wrote "An open letter to African-Americans from Latinos" through the NNPA. This letter, which included over 40 Latino cosignatories representing academia, the arts, activism, and community organizing among others, was run in the St. Louis American on August 28, 2003. In this letter, this group of Latinos seeks to counter the perceived attack against the Black population as a result of how the new Census numbers are interpreted. It begins, "As Latino/a teachers, activists, community people, students, artists and writers, we stand fiercely opposed to anyone making those statistics a reason to forget the unique historical experiences of African-Americans..."

Other key lines highlight the spirit of this letter in common, and its opposition to any unethical use of population numbers. "Those newly announced statistics emphasize difference and pit Brown against Black." And, "We oppose the divisiveness encouraged by statistics about who is more numerous than who." This Open Letter was not only written as an act of goodwill, but also as shared expression of concern. NNPA member papers have included reactions from readers who question the motive behind all the hoopla behind the Census and mainstream media reports on Latinos as the largest minority. A reader states that, "A trick has been played on African-Americans...it does say something about a country that is doing all that it can to reduce the 'power' of African-Americans." Another adds that "we need to recognize potential for conspiracy and manipulation...blacks are beginning to experience another wave of racial bias and favoritism not in our favor, but in

favor of bi-lingual applicants, light skin, longhaired profiles of Hispanic descent, and attempts to replace our threatening stance against discrimination with a Hispanic vote." (I want to thank Jennifer Dienhart for obtaining these NNPA quotes).

As would be expected from our presentation and discussion of the roles and objectives of the Black and community press in Section II, the St. Louis American coverage of issues of Latino relevance is limited. In fact, the city's only major daily, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, by far outnumbers it. The St. Louis American, resembles the statement that the personality of this type of paper "is usually the function of two factors: ownership and the community itself" (Lauterer 1995:177). Thus, the stories it carries continuously deal with police brutality against Blacks and crime, the state of the public schools which is overwhelmingly African American, or Black figures in sports.

In its own way, the St. Louis American is reflecting the community to which it belongs and as it reports on it, it seeks to provide a Black voice—an alternate and personal one. It was only when mainstream coverage of the Census material, interpreted as incomplete at best and malicious at worst, placed the African American population on the defensive that the paper intervened in the dialogue.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

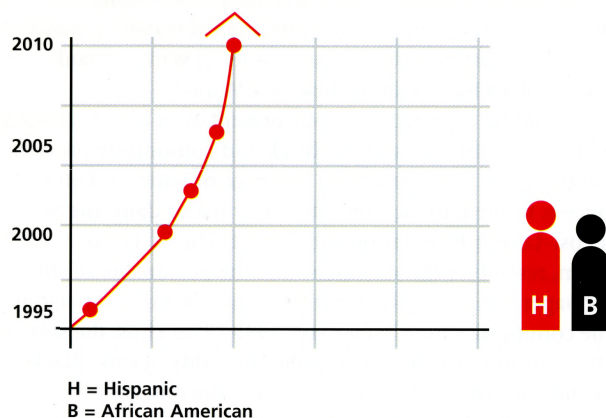
As the title of this session implies, in the area of Latino Studies, new demographics require new approaches. The fact that Latinos are the *de facto* largest minority does provide new thresholds and challenges. No longer is the larger society or White-led sector the only determinant in understanding this country's ethnic relations and futures. "The future of urban politics and resulting public policy will be shaped significantly by the political posture of blacks, Latinos, and Asians toward each other" stated ten years ago James Jennings in an edited work in 1994 (p. xii).

My own contribution to this newest of academic worlds is to take advantage of a research tool we Latinos often ignore: our bilingualism. Just about all Latino researchers can read the Black press; but only a few African Americans can read the Spanish one. Hence, a future project involves comparing coverage of similar events in Black and Latino (in English and/or Spanish) weeklies and community presses. Finding an Asian American colleague who would entertain cross listing with an Asian American publication written in an Asian language (to complement those written in English), could be very fruitful.

The next and immediate stage of this current research endeavor is to collect stories on Latino growth and presence from three other Black papers in Saint Louis; the weeklies St. Louis Argus and the Saint Louis Sentinel, and the monthly Limelight. The Limelight has already sown rewards. In the early part of 2003, the St. Louis Limelight professed... "Hispanics the Largest Minority: Don't You Believe it!" After questioning the Census results and its motives, the writer wonders why Black Latinos are not counted as Black, and why English-speaking Caribbeans are seen as coming from Latin America(!?). Thus, he asserts, "But trust me we are not a minority of a minority. We're still #1 in that category. Tell the Census, *USA Today* and the *Post* to 'think about it'."

I also expect to collect coverage on Latino growth from Black papers in Kansas City, a city with a larger percentage of Latino inhabitants. It could be interesting to note what differences may be, and whether the larger presence of Latinos there has any impact on how the Black press responded to the





Census reports, and the mainstream media coverage of it. At end, my work seeks to document how particular communities react to the changes brought upon by the growing Latino population in areas with previously established demographic, racial, and ethnic orders such as is (was?) the case in Saint Louis, Missouri. The Black, community, or ethnic press can be great providers of insight into those changes and challenges.

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#### LATINO STUDIES SESSION:

"Latina/o Studies at the Crossroads: New Demographics, New Approaches" Adrian Burgos, Chair

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